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A new era for social protection analysis in LMICs? A critical social policy perspective from the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA)

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Abstract

This paper advocates for a new generation of social protection research that takes seriously the analysis of social policy-making processes and welfare outcomes in Low- and Middle-Income countries (LMICs). It examines the array of divergent meanings and practices arising from the global spread of social protection as a political discourse since the late 1990s. Incorporating new evidence from the oft-neglected Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), the paper employs a Grounded Theory approach (informed by the sociological tradition). A conceptual framework is constructed from the social policy and critical discourse literatures which produces two inter-related levels of analysis: (i) at the level of policy discourse, the paper shows how social policy as a field of analysis and policy practice in the Global North has been re-interpreted through social protection discourses in LMICs. This reveals three orders of social protection discourse: social risk management, institutionalisation of social protection (specifically social assistance) and social justice/social contracts; and (ii) at the empirical level, the paper incorporates new evidence from MENA to show that there has been ‘accommodation’ of social protection into existing political and institutional contexts, thereby confirming salient concerns in the literature regarding social protection’s capacity to improve social justice outcomes. Hence, the paper highlights areas of ‘discourse closure’ in the social protection political discourse and its current empirical applications. The paper concludes by presenting a new theoretical framework which supports a more complex analysis of social protection based on: (1) state and civil society relations; (2) ethical parameters of policy; (3) the extent to which social protection programme support socially cohesive processes of policy-making and outcomes.

Keywords: social policy, social protection, policy framing, social assistance, policy discourse, Middle East and North Africa

Introduction

International development practice took a social policy turn in the late 1990s following the rise of the social protection policy discourse. No longer viewed as a “burden” by international donor agencies (Mishra, 1998: 492), “social protection increasingly defines an agenda for social policy in developing countries Barrientos and Hulme (2008: 3): the symbol of a new shift away from structural adjustment programmes and narrow social safety nets (the ‘Washington Consensus’) towards a new focus on the social policy systems of Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs) (Gough and Wood, 2003; Hulme and Barrientos, 2008; De Haan, 2014). Landmark donor reports have emerged since 2000 starting with the World Bank’s *Attacking Poverty* (2000) and *Social Protection Sector Strategy: From safety net to spring board* (2001). *Social Protection: New Directions of Donor Agencies* (Conway et al., 2000) located the interest in social policy as part of the longstanding influence of donor agencies on public policy agendas in LMICs.

Today, social protection is recognised as a means of poverty-reduction under Goal 1.3 of the post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda and the aim of ‘universal social protection’ by 2030 has been endorsed in various joint initiatives between the World Bank, International Labour Organisation (ILO) and UNICEF to name but a few major donor organisations (Devereux and Solzórano, 2016; Rawlings, 2013). At the time of writing, the first *Social Safety Nets Report* (World Bank, 2018) was released and includes a chapter dedicated to the concept of Adaptive Social Protection as a framework for conflict-afflicted societies. This reaffirms the expanding applicability of social protection discourse even to regions often missed in the mainstream social policy literature: Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which provides the empirical backdrop to this paper. Some of the main reasons why the MENA region experience calls into question the social protection agenda include: a narrow interpretation of social protection as targeted cash transfers at a time when the social protection paradigm advocates for comprehensive systems and strong state capacities; a long tradition of social assistance and social safety nets in the MENA region which accommodates the social protection paradigm without disturbing underlying drivers of inequality and conflict.

Hence, social protection is a policy idea with significant political currency yet its meanings remain contested at a time when applications on the ground are multifarious and societal

challenges intensify. This raises the issue of seemingly new policy ideas being “accommodated” by existing institutional settings (Dryzek, 2013) and begs the question posed by Voipio (2011) which is whether social protection is a political idea that might not represent the interests of those who are most marginalised in society. For as Fairclough (2013:4, citing Harvey, 1996) notes, “the complex realities of power relations are ‘condensed’ and simplified in discourses”. This marks the point of departure for this paper: in attributing to social protection a broad range of meanings and policy goals as can be found in the rubrics of “prevention, protection, promotion and transformation” (Conway et al., 2001; Devereux and McGregor, 2014), the novel aspect of the concept is in fact being blurred: its affinity with the subject specialism of social policy. For social policy is not merely about the delivery of welfare benefits and social protection programmes important as these are for redistribution, social equality and inclusion; it is also about the political mobilisation that is involved in claims-making and the resulting mechanisms of entitlement that impact social organisation and cohesion (Kildal and Khunle, 2006). By definition, this requires consideration of social protection in terms of the “social and political analysis of the policy communities that determine public policy” (Freeman and Sturdy, 2014:7) rather than the technical or technocratic analysis of policy problems (Dryzek, 2013). Hence, the question that this paper sets out to answer is the following:

How can the concept of social protection be better categorised in order to support the development of social policies in LMICs?

This paper draws from the social policy and discourse analysis literatures, in particular the well-established tradition of research in the policy sciences exploring how policy-makers perpetuate certain worldviews through mechanisms of communication such as political discourses (Lindblom, 1990). As such, policy language matters and if criteria are not set for assessing important policy ideas, governments and ruling political actors can “get away with exploitation and political oppression” (Veit-Wilson, 2000:10). Hence, ‘discourse closure’ arises when policy concepts diverge from “experienced reality” and silence alternative meanings and modes of action (Veit-Wilson’s 2000:9). This signals a dynamic connection between “text, context and consequence” (Taylor, 1997) in relation to social protection which falls in the terrain of political discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013). Hence, this paper does not simply provide a critique of social protection but highlights the way in which policy

discourses play a crucial role in pre-determining policy action (Bacchi, 2016) and may lead to “discourse closure”.

Based on the above, the paper engages with two inter-related levels of analysis: (i) at the level of policy discourse, the paper shows how a ‘re-contextualisation’¹ (Fairclough, 2013) of social policy concepts in the Global North has occurred through donor-led social protection discourses in LMICs; (ii) at the level of MENA, the paper finds that there has been ‘accommodation’² of social protection into existing political and institutional frameworks which fall short of the more transformative potential hailed in the literature (Hickey, 2009; Adesina, 2012). The structure of the argument is as follows: the next section describes the Grounded Theory method and data sources; section three presents the conceptual framework for the paper which comprises of criteria of analysis drawn from the social policy and critical discourse analysis literatures. Based on these criteria, section four presents a categorisation of social protection according to three “orders of discourse”: social risk management, institutionalisation of social protection (specifically social assistance) and social justice/social contracts.

These highlight the importance of policy framing (Schön and Rein, 1994) in shaping development interventions and social welfare outcomes which reveal areas of ‘discourse closure’ in the conceptualisation of social protection. For example, these might be neglect of social and political processes or dissonance with local policy contexts (in this case MENA). On the basis of this categorisation, section five considers the implications of the analysis for policy-making and proposes a new conceptual framework which highlights three normative principles: (1) state-civil society relations in the provision of services; (2) the ethical and not only legal parameters of social protection; (3) the enhancement of social cohesion as a final social protection outcome. For clarity, discussion of MENA is integrated throughout the paper and particularly in relation to “discourse closures”.

Rationale in the context of the social protection literature

¹ ‘Re-contextualization’ refers to discourses in one context being reused in and reshaped by another context (Fairclough, 2013). This bears relevance to the policy transfer literature (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2011) which is relevant to the international development effort. It relates to the broader concept of “intertextuality” which informs the Grounded Theory approach in this paper.

² According to Dryzek (2013), ‘accommodation’ occurs when a policy idea is integrated into existing power relations and contrasts with critical policy analysis approaches.

A vibrant intellectual environment has emerged around social protection since the last 1990s, which this paper refers to as the ‘first generation’ of social protection theorisation, led by international development academics working mainly on Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and South East Asia. This literature has amassed a broad array of meanings and policy attributions including: (1) protection against social risks with a focus on the poor and extremely poor; promotion of human rights or livelihoods; sweeping social transformation³ on a Polanyian scale (Devereux et al., 2011; Hickey, 2010); (2) the full spectrum of public interventions ranging from the extension of social security, as advocated by the International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) Social Protection Floor Framework; to the promotion of targeted cash transfer programmes in both national social policy and humanitarian settings, as advocated by the World Bank.

At the same time, some latent fault-lines now mark social protection conceptualisations: the more optimistic commentators (most of whom study social policy innovations in Latin America) consider that the rise of state-led non-contributory social assistance programmes worldwide heralds new forms of “social organisation” and proof of welfare state capacity in LMICs (Liesering and Barrientos, 2013: 64; Seekings, 2017). Barrientos (2013) further qualifies this by adding that social assistance alone is an insufficient remedy in the long-run without access to public services and employment opportunities. More cautious commentators call for increased dialogue between social protection and “Western” social policy with specific reference to the extension of social security provision (de Haan, 2007; Midgley, 2016). Among these more cautious authors, a body of work emphasises the concept of “political settlements” in LMICs and focuses on the politics of social protection as a barrier to reform and local ownership (Drucza, 2018, 2015; Hickey, 2009, 2011; Niño-Zarazua et al., 2012; Harland, 2014). Hickey (2011) has also described social protection as a “confusing” term. At the most critical end of these debates, Adesina (2012) dismisses social protection as yet another hollow bargaining chip that international donors can use to control the public policy agendas of LMICs.

In MENA – often absent from mainstream social policy analysis due to the overarching interest in security issues by commentators - the social protection effort is, so far, driven by

³ Transformation is understood in the social protection literature as structural change that removes barriers to inequality, social mobility and exclusion (Devereux and McGregor, 2014). It is also more broadly associated with international development as a major outcome of interventions in developing country contexts (Adesina, 2012).

unconditional cash transfer provision to refugee populations (as in Jordan and Lebanon) or the reform of food and fuel subsidies as a condition of international financial assistance (Author, 2018). Indeed, the arrival of social protection to MENA as a political discourse bearing the fruits of social policy reform following the 2011 Arab uprisings has arguably reinforced existing social and institutional asymmetries (Author, 2013; Loewe, 2013). For the purposes of this paper, MENA is a geographical region that covers North Africa, the South Mediterranean, Arab and Persian Gulf. The author of this paper has conducted research across the Arab region including Turkey and Iran and as such the discussion of social protection in this paper is mindful of the breadth of experiences across this diverse region.

The approach to social policy analysis in this paper is distinctive from the wider social protection literature (such as Niño-Zarzua et al., 2012; Hickey and Lavers, 2015) in that it identifies the principal heuristic criteria of social policy as a field of study that developed in the Western European literature (Ginsburg, 1992; Mishra, 1998; Pierson, 2001) as explained in the section called “Social Policy Criteria” which will follow. This approach allows a comprehensive analysis of social protection as policy text arising within a particular policy community and having policy implications in LMICs. Rather than refer in general to the development of welfare states in European societies, or associate social protection too closely to the idea of “political settlements” (Drucza, 2018, 2015; Laver, 2016; Lavers and Hickey, 2015), the paper re-affirms the strong association between social protection and the “mother subject” of social policy and extends theoretical insights henceforth. In addition, the paper is only focused on the conceptualisation of social protection in international development discourse, not in the literature on welfare states or regimes in non-OECD countries. For reasons of space and coherence, this wider welfare regime literature is not addressed in this paper since it remains a conceptual endeavour which is not orienting the policies of the intentional development community as the concept of social protection is.

Analytical Approach and Data

Reference is made in this section to Appendices A to E (in the Annex). The Grounded Theory method which is used in this paper is based in the sociological tradition (Strauss and Glasner, 1989; Charmaz, 1990) and was employed in combination with critical discourse analysis (Denscombe, 2014; Fairclough, 2013; Bacchi, 2017; Dryzek, 2013). This methodological orientation lends itself well to the analysis of the first generation social protection literature as a body of policy knowledge with associated policy interventions.

Sociologically-informed Grounded Theory draws from the symbolic interactionist tradition (Charmaz, 1990) which is concerned with how social action is dependent on frameworks of subjective meaning-making (semiosis) and as such, how both oral and written text shape and are shaped by social action (Fairclough, 2013). The reference to “text, context and consequence” (Taylor, 1997; Diem et al. 2016) in this paper reflects this analytical orientation. Data sources are discussed in more detail in the next section.

Here, it should be noted that the primary focus of data collection and analysis in this paper was written text entailing an exhaustive desk-based review of policy and academic documents on social protection. This type of unsolicited official data is called “extant” text and in line with Ralph et al. (2014) can be analysed in a contextual manner to support the interactive ethos of Grounded Theory, thereby fulfilling the critical discursive objectives in this paper. Extant data was supported by oral text in the form of a smaller set of face-to-face meetings and formal interviews with policy-makers in international donor agencies, MENA governments and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) working in the MENA region. As such, the iterative and comparative application of Grounded Theory incorporated “extant” text as a moment or a social event of meaning-making (Fairclough, 2013).

In line with this focus on text and semiosis, an “order of discourse” is defined as the “semiotic dimension of an event” and represents a “social ordering of relationships between different ways of meaning-making” (Fairclough, 2013: 233). An order of discourse is a “pre-condition for and a constraint on action”, hence the relevance of analysing social protection orders of discourse in this paper and what avenues for social policy interventions they espouse. Furthermore, extant and oral text are not static: their content is borrowed, absorbed reformulated and interpreted in new contexts or fields. In the words of Stone (2017) all policies undergo “morphological transformations”. In Grounded Theory and discourse analysis, this process of interpretation fits into the wider framework of “intertextuality” (Kristeva, 1980, Charmaz, 1990) which highlights how discourse in one field, such as the mainstream social policy literature in this paper is reformulated into another field such as social protection in LMICs. In effect, therefore, the three orders of discourse presented in this paper reflect this process of active reproduction of new policy ideas.

Finally, the author was/is the principle investigator in three research projects starting in 2009, during which research was undertaken for this paper: an ESRC standard grant RES-062-23-1803 (2009-2014), an on-going Carnegie Corporation grant BC-SMSP-MENA-017 (2018-2020) and an on-going GW4 initiative on social protection funded by the Universities of the South West of England (2016-2019). Social policy and social protection are core themes in these projects and as such, the author benefits from in-depth engagement with the social protection literature as well as witnessing the changes in social policy discourses in the MENA region that are now headlined by the idea of social protection. In addition, the author has led a large number of policy reports on social protection in MENA and been involved in senior level policy conferences (see Appendices D and E in the annex). Thus, as advocated in Charmaz's (1990) articulation of sociologically-grounded Grounded Theory, the author of this paper is an "informed and experienced" social policy researcher writing from a position of deep familiarity with the concept of social protection and the MENA region.

Data Sources

Due to the paper's interest in examining conceptual linkages between social policy and social protection, data sources were focused on conceptual discussions of social protection in the academic and donor literatures. Data took two forms:

- (a) "extant" text comprising of milestone donor reports on social protection since 2000, seminal academic writings which set out the 1st generation field of social protection from the late 1990s (authors often acted as international consultants) and national development plans of MENA governments which were included as part of the social protection reports that the author led (see Appendix E). These were not directly analysed for this paper but are subsumed in the analyses of social protection that is provided. Appendix A provides the full overview of the documents analysed for this paper, totalling 77. The key titles are also included in the reference list of the paper which has been categorised for ease of reference. All documents were verified for their authenticity, credibility and representativeness (Denscombe, 2010). The documents were coded manually.
- (b) oral text as part of senior level policy conferences (see Appendix D) and a small number of face-to-face interviews focusing mainly on the MENA region. These

involved officials in Ministries of Social Welfare, Agriculture and Labour. There were around 50 such conversations. These helped to build a picture of social policy developments in the MENA region and support the forefront argument on social protection. This is why the MENA region is referenced as suitable in this paper and is also not at the forefront of the discussion. Oral data was synthesised with the use of memo-writing as required in Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 1990). Appendix D provides a list of these meetings and to safe guard anonymity, key ideational information has been removed.

Appendix B explains how the document searches took place and gives evidence for the coding process. Two key analytical processes were employed: “constant comparison and continued questioning” (Charmaz, 1990). Data analysis involved coding, memo-writing and theoretical sampling aimed at checking the coherence of the orders of discourse of social protection and the examples of discourse closure that are discussed in this paper. As shown in Appendix B, “sensitising” concepts and criteria for document searches (Charmaz, 1990) were drawn from the social policy and critical discourse analysis literatures to identify data sources, explore relations between data categories and analyse the properties of the emerging social protection categories so that data saturation was reached. Two stages of document gathering and analysis were carried out starting with the major theoretical textbooks, donor reports and a small number of journal paper. At the time of revising this paper, a further quality check was done and all data sources reviewed again to check for gaps or inconsistency in interpretations following the reviewer comments.

The data analysis followed the principle of theoretical sampling as the basis of theoretical development (Charmaz, 1990). As shown in Appendices B and C, there was constant comparison between “data and data, data and codes, codes and codes, codes and categories, categories and themes” (Charmaz, 1990). Codes were based on theoretically relevant concepts arising from the conceptual framework of the paper (see next section) and contextual data such as type of publication, author details and aims of publication which accounts for the critical discursive analysis of extant text (Ralph et al., 2014). These are shown in Appendices B and C. Hence, the rigour of the Grounded Theory method was ensured by developing a range of relevant codes or conceptual categories, saturating them through repeated textual evidence and finally, explaining the document based sources and supportive oral data. The paper presents these explanations as a textual interpretation” which

derived meaning from the data in order to develop a new conceptual categorisation of social protection (Denscombe, 2014:282).

Finally, it should be noted that one way to strength the findings of this paper would be to expand the fieldwork to test these orders of discourse more fully across different regional, policy and organisational settings. In addition, to fully map out the policy communities from within which social protection emanated, it might also be helpful to produce a mapping of how policy actors are connected conceptually and geographically thereby producing a policy network analysis of social protection.

Conceptual Framework of the Paper: A Critical Social Policy Perspective

The paper combines theoretical and analytical insights from social policy and critical policy analysis to deeply evaluate the concept of social protection. The policy sciences in the Global North have a long tradition of engaging with analysis of political discourse for instance in the influence of framing theory in relation to gender or health policies (Bacchi, 2017; Schon and Rein, 1994; Taylor, 1997) or the definition of the welfare state (Veit-Wilson, 2000). The benefit of such a critical policy approach in LMIC contexts is to highlight often overlooked dimensions of analysis such as the political agency of state and non-state actors in the implementation of development interventions or the role of informal social welfare institutions (such as religious groups or tribal affiliations).

Moreover, attention to policy discourse is especially relevant in contexts where state institutions are weak: policy documents can act as powerful tools of decision-making (see Author 2009). In this sense, the paper agrees with international development academic and policy observers in that that consideration of the ethical and normative underpinnings of policy concepts in international development should be considered a necessary means of clarifying policy action on the ground (Holzman and Jorgensen, 2001; Barrientos, 2016; Plagerson and Ulriksen, 2016). In what follows, the key criteria by which the concept of social protection is analysed in this paper are explained. These criteria acted as sensitising concepts for data collection and initial coding (as explained above), and they furnish the means by which the conceptual framework is constructed. Areas of discourse closure are identified as a result.

Critical Policy Analysis Criteria

First, the paper outlines the key elements of the critical policy analysis literature which broadly converge around the argumentation-oriented tradition in the policy sciences (Baacchi, 2017; Dryzek, 2013; Majone, 1989; Schon and Rein, 1994). These unite around a post-structuralist perspective of policy as a body of knowledge which filters what new ideas and information policy-makers act upon, and therefore how a society is governed (Freeman and Sturdy, 2014; Bacchi 1999; 2009). These ideas have a long-established presence in international development as was made clear in the seminal work of Ferguson (1994). Indeed, Minogue's (2002) analysis of the flawed implementation of the Washington Consensus in developing countries argues that better understating of local institutions and in some cases, the strengthening of institutional capacity are essential pre-requisites for the successful implementation of any policy reform in developing countries (Minogue, 2002).

Inspired by Dryzek (2013), this paper posits critical policy analysis against technocratic or accommodation-based analyses. The way in which policy issues are framed thus becomes key to understanding what solutions will be provided to particular social problems and also how the process of problem setting itself constitutes policy actors and citizens themselves (Bacchi, 2016). In this vein, the attention to policy analysis in this paper highlights the extent to which social protection is an institutionally embedded policy discourse which pre-empts the practical options that are open to policy-makers (Bacchi, 2016). Herein lies the crucial ideas of "re-contextualisation" and "accommodation" in this paper. In this sense, policy-making should be a process of democratic communication where information is shared to enhance a level playing field in decision-making (Dryzek, 2013). As Voipio (2011) and others have argued therefore, analysis of the "social" and dimensions of social protection programmes is essential because poverty-reduction in the international development effort has remained a technical endeavour. In line with this approach, the main insights which critical policy analyses brings to this paper also fit with the analysis of extant data in Grounded Theory (Ralph et al., 2014). These criteria are below and enable the analysis which is summarised in Table 1 that follows. They support the linkages on "text, context and consequence" in this paper (Taylor, 1997; Diem et al. 2017).

- 1) who are the main authors of the policy documents?
- 2) how are policy problems defined?
- 3) is there social/political resistance or acquiescence to their policy discourses?

- 4) are existing social inequalities reproduced through the types of programmes espoused by the policy documents on social protection?

Social Policy Criteria

The paper now outlines how the social policy literature can be used to shed light on the conceptualisation of social protection as a policy idea. The criteria - outlined below - are based on a synthesising effort by the author and draw upon leading texts that define the key characteristics of social policy (Mishra, 1998; Pierson, 2001; de Haan, 2007). These characteristics emphasise the attention given in social policy research not just to final welfare outcomes such as redistribution or social cohesion but also to issues of governance and political agency as defining markers of these outcomes: social rights are gained not only through the initiative of benevolent statesmen but through the political action of citizens to claim them and to enact them in relation to other citizens (Kabeer, 2014; Hickey, 2014).

Hence, the criteria that are set out below allow a complex analysis of the interactions between the aims, mechanisms and outcomes of social policy. This helps to show how the approach to social policy analysis in this paper is distinctive from Niño-Zarzua et al. (2012) and Hickey and Lavers (2015) in that it identifies the essential heuristic criteria of social policy that enable a complex analysis of social protection rather than refer in general to the development of welfare states in the European societies or associate social protection too closely to the idea of “political settlements” (Drucza, 2018, 2015; Lavers and Hickey, 2015). The criteria are below and also shown in Table 1 which follows:

- 1) ***Policy analysis and “problematization” matter:*** social policy is equally concerned with social welfare outcomes such as homelessness or poverty, as it is with the ideological and political terms upon which social issues come to be constructed as social problems. As Bacchi (2016) argues, “we are governed through problematizations, rather than through policies”.
- 2) ***Political struggle, not just service delivery:*** Devereux et al. (2011) remind us that social policy is not only about service delivery but is itself a project of political and class struggle with its most symbolic affinity to Trade Unionism and workers’ rights. Political struggle was also a key factor in the expansion of social protection in Latin

American countries and India, and for a while in North Africa during the 2011 uprisings. Thus, relations of cooperation or conflict between state and civil society actors important drivers of social policy.

- 3) ***The nature and scope of the state:*** It follows from the above that social policy is fundamentally linked to the development of the modern nation-state and its mandate to provide, fund or regulate public services (Tanzi, 2005). Centeno et al. (2017) and Surrender (2016) refer to the fragmented sovereignty and limited institutional capacity of developing states. Minogue (2002) also emphasises state institutional capacity.
- 4) ***Universalism, not just social safety nets:*** the importance of the state in social policy analysis is mirrored by the centrality of social citizenship and universal social provision, two core values that have been credited with the improvements in living standards and decreases in social inequality that were experienced in Western societies after WWII. These arguments are still recognised today by leading commentators as relevant to governance reform and social protection provisioning in LMICs (Mkandawire, 2005; Cook, 2013).
- 5) ***Social regulation, not just social expenditure:*** since the state and institutional analysis matter for social policy, Tanzi (2005) notes that social protection comprises of public expenditure, taxation and social regulation. So far, the debate on social protection in developing country contexts focuses on the public expenditure aspect: how to reduce government budgets and render social assistance spending more efficient. Yet, as Minogue (2002) has argued, “better understating of local institutions and in some cases the strengthening of institutional capacity are essential pre-requisites for the successful implementation of any policy reform in the Global South”.
- 6) ***Ethical not just legal consequences:*** Hence, social policy is an ethical expression of state sovereignty whereby the state has a “social justice and public good function” (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010). This accounts for the development of the post-war cross-party welfare settlements in Europe that marked the establishment of Welfare States as a historical moment that did not only protect workers’ rights but provided social welfare as part of a social contract between state and citizen. Foundational works by

T.H Marshall and Richard Titmus on social citizenship provided the basis for these arguments.

- 7) ***Social transformation is not neatly engineered:*** the establishment of social welfare systems in Europe took time (Green, 2012) and social rights were sometimes granted to prevent working class revolt, as in Germany (Hay, 2002). Overall, the process took centuries and was not free of co-option by state or business elite forces or social control. Watson (2014) for example, has argued that the solution might not be more or less social protection but completely different forms of social policy-making.
- 8) **Limits to social protection:** Standing (2002; 2010) draws attention to “eight crises of social protection”⁴ resulting from the pressures of globalisation and capitalist expansion. These crises include processes of labour re-commodification; a shift away from rights-based to charity based logics of social welfare; increased reliance on safety nets and active labour market policies, all of which undermine state capacities to regulate, fund and provide social protection Tanzi (2002, 2005)
- 9) **Linkages to industrialisation and modernisation:** the social, economic and political impacts engendered by the process of ‘large-scale industrial production’ (Pierson, 2001:12) has long been considered a pivotal driver of the growing need for social protection. The ‘industrialism thesis’ (Pierson, 2001: 15) emphasised the policy and research focus on social expenditure as a key variable of social policy analysis. It also provides the context for the influential Polanyian thesis of the ‘double movement’ which leading social protection authors often refer to (such as Stiglitz and Hickey) but for which empirical evidence remains scant.

Social Protection: Three Orders of Discourse

This section now applies the criteria set out above to analyse the social protection concept. Three orders of discourse are set out in this section which show how social policy, often

⁴ These are: Linguistic, fiscal, legitimisation, moral, social dumping, governance, work, social justice crises.

referred to in the 1st generation social protection literature, has been ‘recontextualised’ (Fairclough, 2013) through the social protection idea in LMICs. This aligns with intertextuality as explained in the methods section above.

Frame 1: The Social Risk Management Approach (SRM)

According to Holzman and Jorgesen (2001), “the revolutionary idea that defines the boundary between modern times and the past is the mastery of risk”. Holzman (2006), a key proponent of the risk-based understanding of social protection, also supported the development of the social risk management (SRM) framework adopted by the World Bank that has come to define its social protection interventions. This frame is one that closely aligns social protection to protection against risks that impede the economic activity of individuals. Market-based interventions are seen as key instruments in this regard. The association between risk and capitalism is well-established in the contemporary social policy and sociology literatures. Indeed, the idea that the welfare state should protect workers against the vagaries of the market or the Polyanian concept of the ‘double movement’, whereby capitalist expansion gives rise to the mobilisation of workers for protection in the form of social security make clear the importance of protection against risk. Moreover, as Tanzi (2005) confirms, the expansion of social security systems in Europe were aimed at protection against risk but this came to be understood not in terms of an isolated case of sudden loss of income but as part of a contingency of events that affect the life-course and thus, complemented by other types of welfare benefit such as access to health and education.

Holzman and Jorgesen (2001) propose a Social Risk Management (SRM) approach which “repositions the traditional areas of Social Protection (labour market intervention, social insurance and social safety nets) in a framework that includes three strategies to deal with risk (prevention, mitigation and coping), three levels of formality of risk management (informal, market-based, public) and many actors (individuals, households, communities, NGOs, governments at various levels and international organizations) against the background of asymmetric information and different types of risk. In their view, “this expanded view of social protection emphasizes the double role of risk management instruments—protecting basic livelihood as well as promoting risk taking. It focuses specifically on the poor since they are the most vulnerable to risk and typically lack appropriate risk management instruments.” Hence, in this view social protection is a safety net as well as a spring-board for the poor (World Bank, 2014).

Munro (2008) discusses the risk-based understanding of social protection, its unequivocal association to neo-classical economics and how it has primarily supported a minimalist role for the state in public service provision. Instead of speaking of need, Munro argues that advocates of the SRM approach invoke the language of preferences and utility. Hence, social protection is justified for utilitarian reasons due to market failures and the primary focus of this risk-based approach is poverty, understood as income poverty (Munro, citing Barr, 2008: 29). There is a clear separation between rights and needs in this respect. Cash transfers, the policy instrument of choice of social protection in the SRM view are favoured due to being administratively cost-effective and focusing on consumption smoothing. As Donovan (2013) notes, cash transfers support the pro-market, individualist-consumer trends that are encroaching upon social policy in the Global North. It is not surprising therefore, that they have also found their way into international development policies and practices in LMICs. Based on the MENA perspective, the risk management approach is becoming more apparent through the increased focus on dealing with external shocks resulting from conflict, emergency humanitarian interventions and population displacements. This is in line with a long-standing view of MENA as a region in crisis and where social policy can only be reactive in nature and focused on immediate relief (Author, 2009).

Frame 2: Institutionalisation of Social Policy (based on non-contributory social assistance)

Proponents of this frame critique the World Bank's SRM framework as shifting focus away from the institutional structures, networks of power and socio-economic relations that underpin society, to individual responsibility through safety nets and social funds. What is key they argue, is the need for a social protection framework that can "institutionalise an approach that affirms the role of collective provision, social rights and redistribution", hence the need to reconnect social protection debates to wider analyses of political economy and public policy (Midgley, 2010). This also supports Standing's (2010) view that social protection must not be about risk compensation but the expansion of citizenship rights, and in particular economic rights. Hence, targeting social protection at the poorest will reduce incentives and economic growth in the long run though superficially, it might appear the fairest policy in the short term. In a similar vein, Mkandawire (2008) has long argued for the benefits of universal public services in reducing poverty levels in the North, an argument endorsed by Gosh (2011) who reiterates the importance of public services and the short-termism of programmes focusing on cash transfers.

Various authors such as Adesina (2012), Dercon et al. (2008) and Kabeer (2014) refer to the need for “social protection such as social insurance” in order to protect against vulnerability to poverty and therefore, emphasise the importance of institutionalised systems of social protection. Kabeer (2014) argues that universalism and redistributive social policies are needed; this is firmly located in the sphere of politics and constituency-building and cannot be reduced to poverty reduction efforts being based on moral precepts and a set of technical solutions. The expansion of the neo-liberal paradigm reshaped social policy into more residual forms, argues Kabeer (2014). She explores the example of Social Funds in India where, in order to improve impact, resources would be better spent on the reform of public administration to provide the most effective means of incorporating measures of inclusiveness, accountability and equity.

Midgley (2013) spells out these arguments further in calling for better dialogue between international development and social policy analysis. There was no interest in income transfers in the early social development literature as it was considered too expensive for developing countries. The systems inherited from the colonial heritage were not studied due to the greater focus by donor agencies and international actors on community development approaches. But key policy developments have now taken place such as the rise of cash transfer schemes in Brazil, Mexico and Latin America, the expansion of social assistance in South Africa and the launch of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India which have captured the imagination of researchers assessing the extent to which non-contributory social assistance is a new form of social welfare provision in the Global South. Various authors in the Latin American contexts have documented the growth of non-contributory social assistance through the provision of cash transfer schemes to poor households in Mexico, Brazil, among others. Liesering and Barrientos (2013) hail these as new expressions of the welfare state in LMICs. In MENA, the main form of institutionalisation that has taken place is in relation to the expansion of health-based social insurance for those in formal employment. Examples include the UAE and Egypt. The trend therefore, is different in MENA and the appetite for cash transfers is not as strong. The extension of health insurance also occurs through private insurance companies.

Midgley (2013) and Piachaud (2005) add a further dimension to these debates by highlighting how social protection has functional or conceptual equivalence to Western Social Security

whereby it has formal universal coverage and is funded from taxation, thereby enhancing both horizontal and vertical redistribution of wealth. In this respect, Midgley (2013) highlights the parallels between North and South social protection systems and draws the broader linkages with social policy analysis. He argues that international development has adopted the social protection term rather than social security because: (i) It covers a wider range of programmes than social security including social insurance, social assistance, and universal social allowances such as food for work programmes, microfinance, cooperative benefit associations and faith-based initiatives; (ii) it transcends the statutory approach of social policy in the study of social security since social protection programme often delivered by NGOs; (iii) it allows focus on meso- and micro- level institutions such as the family and community.

Frame 3: Social Justice and Social Contracts

This frame fits with the extension of social security and the social protection floor framework (social protection) that is advocated by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). It is a somewhat broader view of social protection which is primarily discussed among Northern researchers and analysts, and points to the shortcomings of the current social protection agenda that is dominated by the social risk management approach and its corollary policy of cash transfers. Among these are Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2008), Devereux et al. (2011); Kabeer (2014), Harland (2014) and Hickey (2009, 2011) who emphasise the importance of reconnecting policy interventions aimed at poverty reduction to wider structural and socio-economic reform. Whether these are phrased in terms of linking social rights to social transformation or focusing on the political institutions of developing countries and how these allow poverty to persist, social protection is argued to be more than just a “service delivery sector” (2011:2); indeed that “the most progressive social protection interventions are underpinned by enforceable legislation, which transforms a charitable gesture into a justiciable right” (Devereux et al., 2011:2).

This is an argument not far from that made by Green (2012). It is in the search for the development of a ‘new’ social contract that Green (2012) emphasises the importance of taking a broad governance approach for understanding the way in which states operate in the African context. She argues that a narrow conceptualisation of citizenship has emerged in African states which favours a notion of fiscal citizenship and equates it to political accountability. This has led to an oversight of the more fundamental ways in which states

interact with citizens through the process of policy design and implementation. Green (2012) points to the importance of political struggle in Latin America and India as the only way forward for relations between state and society to be harmonised and for a social space to be created whereby citizens can claim their social rights. Crucially, these changes have occurred in Latin America and India not as a result of development policy transfer but of “situated political society” (Green, 2012:24). In contrast, the experience in the MENA region has been mixed. Arguably, most states showed commitment to inclusive social contracts in the post-war era where commitment to education, health promotion and employment creation enable nation-building projects (Moghadam and Karshenas, 2003). These projects have had different legacies: they exist in name only in fragile states such as Lebanon and on the more centralised regimes such as Egypt, Jordan and the Arab Gulf a more securitised version of state-society relations is now in place. Unfortunately, corruption and lack of trust in the ruling elites undermines citizen expectations about access to public services and a dignified life.

Building on India-based research by Guhan (1994) regarding the functions of social protection as protective, promotive and preventive, Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2008) propose the idea of transformation, whereby social protection can enhance rights, satisfy needs and also empower those living in poverty. In this way, social protection can address social justice concerns such as exploitation of workers or discrimination of ethnic minorities. Harland (2014), Hickey and Lavers (2015) and Ulriksen and Palgerson (2016) have added to these debates more concretely by highlighting the role of ‘political settlements’ and a greater focus on inequality or multi-dimensional poverty. Barrientos (2016) further argues that the enhancement of political inclusion also needs to be factored into the social justice approach. Hickey and Lavers (2015) refer to the adaptation of social protection to an elite-driven model of social safety nets and re-regulation. In arguing for the need to analyse ‘political settlements’, Hickey (2009, 2011) states that it is key to find pockets of good governance, explore ways of enhancing the capacity of public officials and studying types of political institutions. In conjunction with other authors such as Harland (2014), the role of intentional donors is questioned.

Discourse Closure and Accommodation

Discourse analysis has so far shown the way in which the field of social policy has been “re-contextualised” (Fairclough, 2013) through social protection international policy communities. In this section, the paper brings together the analytical criteria set out in the paper’s

conceptual framework with the three social protection policy frames that have been proposed above as a way of categorising social protection. This allows the paper to reach the next level of the analysis in that it reveals areas of “discourse closure” (Veit-Wilson, 2000) in the categorisation of social protection. As noted earlier, “discourse closure” occurs when alternative meanings and modes of action are ignored or silenced. In the paper, these are manifested as concepts (for instance the idea of redistribution might be silenced), key actors defining social protection (for instance, the agency of civil society actors might be ignored) and types of programmes (for example universal health coverage might be neglected). Synthesis of the discussion so far is done with the aid of Tables 1 and 2 which follow.

Table 1 Three policy frames of social protection (Source: the author based on various sources as outlined in the conceptual framework section)

Frames of social protection Social policy analysis criteria	The Social Risk Management Approach (SRM)	Institutionalisation (based on non-contributory social assistance)	Social Justice and Social Contracts
Problem definition	Lack of income; poor or extreme poor; focus on socially vulnerable groups	Income risks faced by individuals living in poverty;	focus on political settlements and issues of political legitimacy

		Extension of social security rights for those in formal employment	<p>Liberal interpretation overlaps with the SRM approach</p> <p>Social justice interpretation overlaps with transformative view of social protection: lack of citizenship rights or access to basic income and social security guarantees;</p> <p>Social Transformation</p>
Universalism vs targeted social safety nets	<p>Targeted, focus on vulnerable group and poor or extreme poor</p> <p>Focus on conditional and unconditional cash transfers</p>	Targeted on the poor and socially vulnerable	<p>Legislation and social rights to access public services</p> <p>Overlaps with contractual Conditional Cash Transfer approach</p>
Regulation, taxation or public expenditure	Mainly donor-funded and focused on efficiencies in social expenditure	Social regulation is necessary and financing is from state budgets, often based on tax sources as in LA, SEA and South Africa	State regulation is required to provide legal guarantees but lack of clarity in the literature on public policy options
Nature and scope of the state and relations with civil society	Donor-state partnership	State-led	State-civil society partnership (with grassroots mobilisation)
<div>Frames of Social protection</div> <div>Social policy analysis criteria</div>	Social Risk Management	Institutionalisation (based on non-contributory social assistance)	Social Contracts and Social Justice
Ethical not just legal consequences	No ethical background beyond targeting the poor	<p>Ethical concerns in relation to poverty-reduction</p> <p>Redistributive outcomes may occur due the</p>	<p>Focus on legal context and legislation</p> <p>Presence of redistributive and social justice drivers in small number of key countries as in Brazil, India</p>

		institutionalisation of new programmes that reach vulnerable groups	and South Africa, aligned with social development objectives
Political struggle and mobilisation	None: this is a technocratic approach to social protection	Yes, such as social mobilisation in some Latin American states and India	Unclear as appears to be state-led initiative in the relevant debates
Social cohesion or transformation	Political status quo is maintained due to prioritisation of budget efficiencies	Political hierarchies remain but the expansion of entitlement and citizenship rights is achieved for the poor and extremely poor	Political status quo may become more solidarity-focused in the move towards a more egalitarian system
Industrial change and modernisation	No clear connections made	Possibly in relation to some states such as China and Brazil	No clear connections made due to focus on political legitimacy and alliances; where social cash transfers are introduced, economic development may have occurred
MENA regional perspective	Adaptive social protection framework and unconditional cash transfers; food subsidy reforms; pilots of unconditional cash transfers occurring as in Lebanon	Old systems of targeting and subsidies persist as in Morocco, Algeria and Egypt; employment-based social security persists in the private and public sector but accounts for the smaller proportion of MENA populations	Struggles have occurred as in Arab Spring but limited constitutional reform; social contract discourse absent in MENA governments; large proportion of informal work; corruption challenge persists

Table 1 helps to make clear the linkages between “text, context and consequence” (Taylor, 1997; Bacchi, 2014) as set out in the conceptual framework, and the extent to which the social protection process itself espouses an equalised space of communication among donors, governments, and local civil society groups. In the social protection literature, Drucza (2015, 2018) and Lavers (2016) also refer to the important, yet often underestimated role of civil society groups in the formulation of social protection programmes in Nepal and Ethiopia. As can be deduced, the three policy frames reflect different political contexts in relation to the

criteria of social policy analysis that have been employed in this paper to categorise social protection. The table shows that the SRM approach is mainly an endeavour supporting consumption smoothing outcomes of the poor and based on a partnership model of international donor and state agencies. Though there is evidence of the effectiveness of these programmes, this approach supports a targeted social assistance approach to the poor and complements similar well-established practices in a variety of LMICs due to the traditional influence of family, community, charitable and religious providers of welfare (Author, 2009).

Thus, it is possible to argue that in the SRM approach, the political and economic context of social protection interventions has been left out. This frame supports a residual, crisis management or appeasement approach to social policy in developing country contexts since the main aim is provide a cash transfer. In the Latin American context, this is tax-funded and the redistribution outcomes are important to consider (Barrientos, 2016) but in the Sub-Saharan African or Middle Eastern contexts, these programmes are donor-funded or based on state subsidies (Hickey and Lavers, 2015; Author, 2014). Questions of scale, sustainability and longer-term impact thus arise. ‘Discourse closure’ may thus be detected in the lack of attention given to political-economic realities on the ground, the social and structural contexts of poverty as well as the priorities of governments and civil society groups themselves. As mentioned above, Drucza (2015, 2018) and Lavers (2016) highlight how civil society groups can often be undermined by powerful political actors and state elites in societies affected by conflict or lacking equitable governance structures (such as in Nepal and Ethiopia) .

Thus, the SRM approach fits well with the residual nature of social policy that has come to characterise some developing countries in the last few decades, not least MENA countries (Author et al., 2019). Its best expression is in the cash transfer programmes that offer a narrow view of social protection (Adesina, 2012). In support of this, empirical research from the MENA region shows this is to be the case even after the events of the 2011 Arab Spring (Author, 2014). Various countries began to make reference to the ILO’s social protection floor and also increased the delivery of cash assistance or introduced short-term unemployment benefits for university graduates. Therefore, it is apt to argue that the SRM is the most clearly articulated in policy terms of the three orders of discourse outlined in this paper. The interest in cash transfers in particular has been significant in this regard, and has supported the focus on socially vulnerable groups without stronger associations with the structural or political causes of poverty or social inequality.

In contrast to the SRM approach, the other two frames of Social Contracts-Social Justice and Institutionalisation support wider definitions of social protection which link it more directly to access to public services, employment creation or the creation of new political spaces. However, the extent to which these approaches promote well-defined policies that reflect the local political context and priorities is still in need of further investigation. This is especially evidenced in the social contracts approach which overlaps with the SRM and Institutional perspectives depending on whether liberal or social interpretations are adopted (Hickey, 2011; Midgley and Piachaud, 2013).

In the case of the Social Contracts-Social Justice frame, the role of political actors, duties and rights are factored into the discourse but there is much less clarity on what kinds of policies would fit into this frame, especially when not all states support it. There is an assumption that the language of social justice, citizenship and social contracts works in developing country contexts. Thaddeus (2016) refers to ubuntu as a source of inspiration for social protection reforms which taps into the social contracts-social justice frame. But the definition of social justice is itself a complex one and often dependent on local circumstances if it is considered as important in the first place. Survey findings from the Latin American and also Arab Barometers for example, show that local populations consider poverty to be an individual responsibility and less important than job creation (also cited in Kabeer, 2012). One proposal made by Kabeer (2014) which may help to extend the social contracts agenda, is the example of the European basic income initiative though in developing country contexts, there has been no uptake apart from some debates in Brazil and South Africa.

The support for an interventionist welfare state may therefore be only typical of the European context. As such, ‘discourse closure’ may be evident in relation to the existing systems of reciprocity and social protection across state and non-state sectors or the existing rationales of social protection that support particular orientations such as charity or social assistance-based. Therefore, Table 1 shows how the social contracts and social justice frame is the one that has been least associated with a clear set of policy options and arguably, offers the most complex definition of social protection and the most ambitious set of policies. It is also the perspective that engages in a concerted way with questions of social regulation and taxation rather than just the management of social expenditure.

The middle ground between the SRM and the social contracts-social justice approach is the Institutional frame, which resonates most notably with the rise of state-funded non-contributory social assistance programmes in LMICs. The latter approach supports the targeted focus on poor or extremely poor groups but adds to the mix the reform of state institutions and the use of fiscal policy or tax-based funding in to order to cover the cost of the social assistance programmes. The Latin American experience is leading debates in this regard. As Barrientos (2013) has argued, these factors focusing on state institutions, fiscal policy and redistribution have been missing from the traditional international development mode of operation. Institutionalisation signals a clear emphasis on policy making structures such as in the enhancement of social accountability or administrative reforms to improve access to existing public services (Dercon, 2008; Kabeer, 2012). The association between this approach with the rise of non-contributory social assistance raises the question about the wider impact of this approach on long-term social welfare outcomes and graduation (Barrientos, 2003). Here, ‘discourse closure’ may exist in relation to the political agency of state and non-state actors such as through community, family, religious or clientelist networks. Also, it would be important to recognise the long tradition of social assistance that exists in LMICs already as in the MENA region (Author, 2009).

Overall, it can also be deduced from Table 1 that the three orders of social protection that currently exist in the literature are largely silent on matters of political resistance. At the time of writing, riots erupted in Jordan due to the cuts in bread subsidy as part of World Bank advice to reform the social protection system of that country. Further research is needed to address mobilisation of this sort and the extent to which social protection is simply being “accommodated” (Dryzek, 2013) within existing power structures or promoting instability in countries where reforms are taking place. In addition, the deeper connections to industrial development and modernisation that effective social protection provision might rely upon are less evident in the three orders of discourse. The ILO’s persistent vision of extending social security for workers has been reformulated to include socially vulnerable groups in the Social Protection Floor framework. This has affinities with the social justice and institutional frames but appears to be losing the battle against the cash transfers agenda. This is certainly the case in most MENA countries. Thus, Table 2 below sets out the key areas of discourse closure that emerge from the above discussion, and goes further by highlighting the final outcome of the analysis in this paper which is to identify a new conceptualisation of social protection. This new conceptualisation is taken forward in the next and final section of this paper. Table 2

shows the areas of discourse closure that have emerged from Table 1. The new conceptual categories of social protection that are presented in Table 2 propose ways in which to close these gaps and in line with social policy analysis, taken together, they may also be enable a more comprehensive analysis of social protection.

Table 2 Areas of Discourse Closure and New Conceptual Categories of social protection

	Social Risk Management	Institutionalisation (non-contributory social assistance)	Social Contracts and Social Justice
Areas of Discourse Closure	Relational understanding of poverty absent; delinks social protection from work	Residual forms of social assistance may exacerbate marginalisation especially if there is no access to jobs or public services	Political settlements can be underpinned by unequal or oppressive forms of governance
New conceptual categories of social protection	Political agency and mobilisation among national state and civil society actors matters in social protection policy making	social protection Programmes that enhance solidarity in the production and consumption of social protection programmes may need to take precedence	The moral and ethical underpinnings of social protection policy matter

Implications for critical social protection analysis

In this final section, the component parts of this paper come together to examine the implications for social protection. Table 2 highlights three conceptual categories that have emerged from the discourse analysis. Firstly, an emphasis on local political agency and in particular, state-civil society relations in the formulation of social and public policies is a key starting point. This reflects basic presents of public policy and the lessons of political analysis that arise from current social protection analysis (Hickey, 2009; 2011; Niño-Zarzua et al. 2012). In regions like the Middle East or Africa, this would emphasise the importance of moving away from Rentier, Security-focused or Patronage-based models of state-society relations to access public services and economic resources. Experiences vary across countries as does the will and appetite for public social mobilisation but as argued by Hickey and Lavers (2015), this approach de-emphasises the influence of international donors, or at another level factors them into the analysis as actors of political and not just social

consequence. The focus on state-society relations additionally opens up analytical scope for considering the nature of political struggle in LMICs as active builders of their own development. This resonates with the small “d” and capital “D” development that Hickey (2009) also refers to.

This point necessarily leads on to the second interrelated category of linking social protection policies into an ethical framework that encompasses a social vision for a given society (Adesina, 2012). Political settlements can be underpinned by unequal or oppressive forms of governance. In the various countries across the world social protection systems have sat side by side with conservative or oppressive political systems. Examples abound such as in Syria, Iraq or China. By taking seriously state-civil society relations, social protection becomes a policy idea that is not only concerned with the protection of individual rights to certain benefits but to the development of social solidarity and collective claims to national wealth. The understanding of solidarity in this paper is drawn from the social policy literature which focuses on social rights and citizenship as in the work of T.H Marshall. It may be argued therefore, that in LMICs, the prevalence of asymmetric relations of power (as can be seen in military-based, monarchical or religious forms of rule) puts in place a normative framework for social protection that is based on networks of national and international ties, favours and allegiances as opposed to a moral bond that is more closely associated with citizenship as a form of self-identification. As such, the ability of governments to use social protection measures to support political legitimacy or exercise political control over their populations ought to receive more attention in the literature.

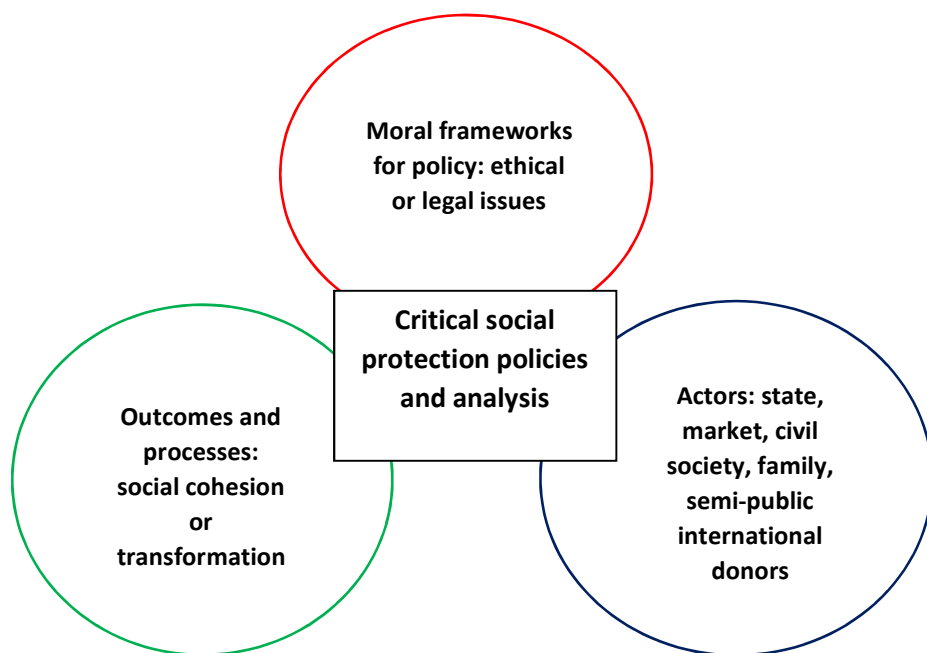
This leads on to the third and final category that is mentioned in Table 1 which is the importance of promoting social solidarity as a policy outcome of social protection programmes. Whereas Barrientos (2016) refers to inclusion; here the paper highlights solidarity as a basis of a more critical analysis since this supports a more level political terrain of negotiation (Dryzek, 2008). Enhancing social solidarity is especially relevant as social protection is increasingly incorporated into conflict-afflicted countries and the international humanitarian endeavour to aid refugees (as in MENA). It is worth noting here that social transformation is most commonly presented as the final outcome of development interventions (Adesina, 2012). But in the case of MENA countries, the historical record is mixed and improvements in health care and levels of education that have occurred have not

met with periods of sustained peace or equality of incomes. Indeed, in some countries, it is hard to establish a sense of state responsibility for those living in poverty, let alone for the larger population. This is due in part to the weak development of state infrastructures in providing social protection to neglected rural populations or ethnic minorities, as well as the existence of territorial conflict but also structural factors in the economy such as the large number of informal workers or family-run enterprises which hinders access to the formal social security system.

Barrientos (2016) also reflects upon ‘inclusion’ as a competing outcome to welfare in developing countries. The emphasis on social cohesion can also be found in the OECD discourses on social protection (2012) and is further elaborated by Jutting and Prizzon (2013) where social cohesion is fundamentally based on the existence of trust. If we are to take seriously the institutional critique provided by Minogue (2002) earlier in relation to the Washington consensus, then the question of social solidarity in both formal and informal contexts as a means of policy development and a goal guiding access to public services becomes crucial as a final outcome of social protection policy endeavours. In some of the existing literature, this is reflected in the notion of “politics matters” (Hickey, 2011).

In sum, returning to the analytical focus of this paper, the three implications highlighted above serve to produce Figure 1 below, which proposes that a more critical formulation and analysis of social protection arises from sensitivity to three domains: (i) the broad array of political actors and institutions who are involved in decision-making or programme delivery in relation to social protection and how they are connected to each other or not through relations of co-operation, conflict or co-option; (ii) the moral framework for social protection policies and the extent to which these prioritise ethical or legal concerns in decision making and the policy process; (iii) the extent to which the production and outcomes of social protection programmes favour the development of social cohesion and solidarity rather than a more amorphous final outcome of social transformation.

Figure 1. Main elements of a critical social policy analysis framework for Social Protection (source: the author)



The framework presented in Figure 1 may be used to interrogate the application of social protection policies or strategies in a given country context in order to ascertain fundamental questions about whether such interventions are indeed markers of a historical shift in social protection provision in such countries or whether they are extending policy legacies of the past and only accommodating a “technical fix” (de Haan, 2007). The framework also factors in the role of social expenditure and regulation in LMICs in case these are adopted as key determinants of social policy changes. In the mainstream social policy literature, the analysis of the rate and pattern of social expenditure was considered a significant measure of the growth and modification of welfare states in line with patterns of economic growth. These relied on systems of social regulation whose unravelling in the current era of globalisation marks a critical juncture for the future profile of social protection across the globe.

Conclusion

The concept of social protection has spawned a new order of research and policy initiatives since the late 1990s in LMICs ranging from: (1) studies of the welfare regimes of developing countries (owing also to the dramatic economic and social transformations of the East Asian countries) (such as in Gough and Wood, 2003); (2) the formal adoption of social protection in the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals agenda; (3) the greater acceptability of the idea of universal public provision among the major donors such as the World Bank and DFID. Inspired by the abundance of references to social policy in the social protection literature, this paper has sought to contribute to the theoretical conceptualisation of social protection not simply with the aim of critiquing it but to highlight the practical ways in which political discourse and policy framing pre-empt policy action. The rationale for this is that, after almost two decades of activity, the social protection research and practitioner community is now at a juncture where it is necessary to critically take stock of the various “orders of discourse” (Fairclough, 2013; Hajer and Laws, 2013) and frames of meaning (Schon and Rein, 1994) that define social protection and operationalise it in policy terms. Indeed, the paper proposes that the operationalisation of social protection in developing country contexts is subject to “discourse closures” and therefore, skewed forms of policy-making (Veit-Wilson, 2000).

Using sociologically-informed Grounded Theory, the paper analysed social protection as “text, context and consequence” (Taylor, 1997; Baachi, 2016) to advocate for a new generation of more critical social protection research in LMICs. Criteria of analysis were drawn from the social policy and critical policy literatures which culminated in a categorisation of social protection according to: (a) three orders of discourse that also take into account new evidence from the oft-neglected MENA region (Table 1), (b) the identification of areas of ‘discourse closure’ (Table 2) and, (b) a proposal regarding new conceptual categories for analysing social protection (Table 2 and Figure 1).

Two inter-related levels of analysis are presented in the paper: (i) regarding social protection policy discourse, the paper shows how a ‘re-contextualisation’ of social policy as a field of analysis and policy practice in the Global North has occurred through social protection discourses LMICs. This reveals three orders of social protection discourse: social risk management, social justice/social contracts and institutionalisation of social protection (specifically social assistance); (ii) at the level of the MENA empirical perspective, the paper

finds that there has been ‘accommodation’ of social protection into the existing political and institutional frameworks, thereby confirming salient concerns in the literature regarding social protection’s socially and politically transformative potential.

The approach in this paper makes a contribution to existing references to social policy and welfare in the social protection literature (such as Niño-Zarzua et al., 2012; Hickey and Lavers, 2015) because it constructs a comprehensive framework of social policy analysis based on heuristic criteria. It therefore, shows that no single criterion is sufficient but a more complex analysis of social protection is required. As such, this paper explores how the first generation field of social protection was constructed and builds on this literature by proposing a new framework of analysis. To this end, the following categories of social protection are highlighted: (1) a more critical analysis of state-civil society relations in the provision of social protection; (2) the ethical and not only legal parameters of social protection policy making; (3) the enhancement of social cohesion as a final social protection goal, rather than a catch-all objective of social transformation. In future research, this framework may help to assess whether social protection is a vehicle for historical shifts in the social policies of LMICs.

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